



The Newsletter of the African Burial Ground Project

UPDATE

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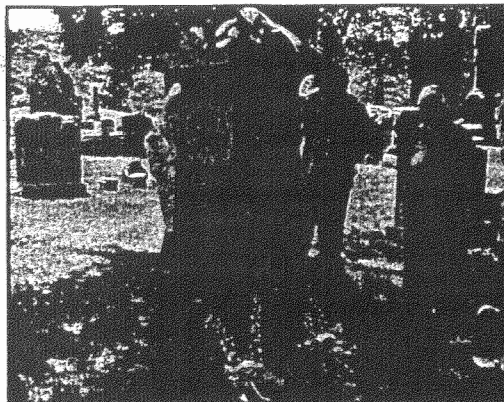
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and more!

Celebrating The Life Of Elizabeth Jennings

Elise Alexander



Family and friends gather in prayer at the gravesite of Elizabeth Jennings Graham in Cypress Hills Cemetery, Queens, NY

Photo credit:
Charris Walker

June 5, 2001 marked the one hundred-year anniversary of the death of one of New York's most remarkable citizens, Elizabeth Jennings, "the Rosa Parks of 19th century New York." In order to celebrate her life and commemorate her place in New York City history, The Office of Public Education and Interpretation of the African Burial Ground Project (OPEI) dedicated the day to paying tribute to her memory.

The day began at 12 Noon with a visit to her gravesite at Cypress Hills Cemetery in Queens, New York. There, Elizabeth Jennings Graham is buried alongside family members in a section of the cemetery for parishioners of St. Phillip's Church. Members of the OPEI staff and OPEI intern Susan Ackoff Ortega were joined by descendants of children raised by Elizabeth Jennings. A granite obelisk that stands under an enormous tree atop a hill marks the Jennings' family plot.

The cemetery visit was followed by a 4:00 P.M. reception at the office of the OPEI. During this time OPEI intern and artist Susan Ackoff Ortega exhibited her mural, "Elizabeth Jennings vs. The Third Avenue Railroad Company," and discussed research she has conducted about Elizabeth Jennings' life and her role in desegregating New York City public transportation. (See page 13)

Continued on page 11

"African Americans and Native Americans were our first freedom fighters. Long before Thomas Jefferson... wrote those magnificent words about all men being created equal, people of color were acting on those words."

William Loren Katz (2001)

→→→ LETTERS TO THE EDITOR →→→

Students Concerned About Project Funding

My name is Meroe Elahi and I am a seventh grade teacher. On December 14 and 15, as part of our exploration of the early history of Africans in America, approximately fifty students visited the African Burial Ground Project. Mr. Kahlil Shaw gave us a thorough overview of the Project. However, the class was concerned when we were informed that the laboratory at Howard University has been closed. That led us to believe that the fate of the Project was in jeopardy.

None of my students had known about the history of slavery in New York City prior to our exposure to the African Burial Ground Project. These young people all call New York City their home and the African Burial Ground Project is a legacy we'd like to keep alive. To think that a crucial part of this city's history could be lost as a result of lack of funding encouraged us to communicate with you. If you have the time to answer any of the students, I know your response would be appreciated. All the best to you in 2001.

Meroe Elahi, Teacher
School For The Physical City
New York, New York

Public Educators Making A Difference

Thank you for making this year's Career Day at Community Elementary School 28 a success! The classroom presentations gave the students an opportunity to explore a broad range of careers and professions and opened windows into the world of work. Career Day was a meaningful and rewarding experience for both the teachers and the students. We hope you too enjoyed the experience, and look forward to continuing our partnership in the 2001-2002 school year.

Sincerely,
Jessica Arkin, Proj. Mgr.
Debra Sheldon, Proj. Coord.
Walks of Life-Ventures in
Education, Inc.
New York, New York

First off, thank you for having us. Not only were we informed about the working conditions and ways in which the African Americans were forced to live, but also we learned a little about their history and past while they still lived in Africa. People who could manage to bury their loved ones with possessions chose to bury them with beads that represented importance.

Not only did we get to see a slideshow but we also got to see two wonderful murals and learn some more about African history from a large dial on the center of the floor in

the lobby. All of these murals did a wonderful job of depicting African heritage. Thank you for this wonderful learning experience.

Sincerely,
Gabriella Formosa
M.S. 104
New York, New York

Thanks For Newsletters

Thank you for sending me a complete set of the *Update* Newsletters related to the African Burial Ground Project. I have attempted to follow the progress of this project, and I'm sure these materials will be quite informative for my research on tourism to slave sites.

Sincerely,
Sandra L. Richards
African American Studies,
Theatre
Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois

Intern Notes....

I deeply appreciated the assistance of the OPEI staff who gave of their time and contributed to the successful completion of my mural. They welcomed me as part of the staff and helped me research historical data, photograph material to create slides for a public presentation, and stretch the four large canvas sections of the mural. They even modeled for me so I could adjust the faces and poses of people depicted in the mural.

I enjoyed taking part in OPEI's Spring Youth Symposium. It was a pleasure to share Elizabeth Jennings' story and the mural with the attendees, especially the young people. Too few people know about this New York City human rights heroine. I was moved by the audience's response and thrilled by the clamor of camera flashes going off when we showed Elizabeth Jennings' photograph. Our commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Elizabeth Jennings' passing at her gravesite and the reception at OPEI will remain close to my heart for years to come.

In Solidarity,
Susan Ackoff Ortega,
Intern
New York, New York

**OPEI welcomes letters from our
readers but reserves the right to
edit for length and clarity.**

OPEI'S 3RD ANNUAL STUDENT WRITING COMPETITION

"Ayo John"

First Place - Short Story

High School

By Caprice Hortense Gray
Hunter College High School

The woman was tall and dark, skin so black that it shone a deep plum purple beneath the light of a full moon, eyes like ebony marbles. She had arrived fresh off the boat only a year before, and for all twelve months that her feet had tread on American soil, not one word of English had passed through her thick ebony lips. Everyday she strode about her work silent and dim-eyed, memories of the Middle Passage hidden in the depths of her eyes.

"She's slow," the Missus had said at first, delighting in her newfound job as a teaching missionary. She began reading daily Bible passages to the African, her voice loud and slow, as if the woman were a small child. And everyday the diffident student would stand in a corner gazing coldly into the woman's pale, pointed face, letting the words slide past her ears like water over rocks.

It soon became clear that it was not the lack of knowledge that was preventing the woman from speaking, it was the lack of will. "I cannot understand why you chose to be so difficult, Mary," her mistress said sorrowfully, and the black woman's

eyes flickered past her, for there was no one in the room named Mary.

They tried everything to make her talk. One winter day her enraged master had taken a hot poker and laid it across her bare back, leaving an angry red welt that scarred black and ugly. And still she would speak nothing but the language of her homeland, words that dropped softly and slowly from the tip of her tongue like southern molasses. The woman refused to replace these words with the *toubob's* stiff, harsh ones, for she knew that by doing so she would be accepting their bondage, abandoning her land for another.

She felt lost in this strange *toubob* land, where people were pale-skinned and long-nosed, where trees were sick and spindly, where houses sat like identical boxes beneath a yellow sun and strip of dirty blue sky. She missed the tall grasses and sweeping bayou trees of her home, the wide-open skies that stretched to the edge of the world. When she had been taken from her home (sold for a sack of cowrie shells and a bolt of red cloth), a piece of her heart had been ripped from her chest and devoured by its *toubob* thieves. With this hole in her heart she felt like a little lost bird, trying in vain to flap wings that were broken and could never carry her home.

The woman's only joy was her child, a small brown-skinned youth whom she loved fiercely. They were trying to steal him away from her, she knew; the missus gave him little candies for each new word he learned, and the master gave him carriage rides for each old word he forgot. "Ayo," his mother had called

him since birth. "John," his white owners christened him.

One day, when the trees that lined the streets were white with blossoms, the young boy fell ill. Hot and sickly, he tossed and turned between the faded sheets on which he slept, black eyes bright with fever. His mother did not leave his side, sitting glassy-eyed in the dank stillness of the cellar, listening, as the harsh rattle in her son's chest grew worse with each passing day.

"Boy's got de consumption," Mammy, the old cook, told the woman by the second day. She stood in the doorway, afraid to come too near, her wrinkled face drooping with "sorry." "Ain't no 'mount a voodoo you can do now, honey. All's anyone can do is watch an' wait." The cellar grew thick with the scent of the boy's sickness, and still the mother sat, eating nothing, wasting away beside her dying son.

The missus came on the third day, a handkerchief at her nose. "I am so sorry, Mary," she murmured, her voice muffled through the cloth. "We are praying for John; it is all we can do." She paused, gazing down at the boy's small, feverish face. "You too must pray to the good Lord." "Mawu," the woman whispered in response. And still she sat.

"The boy will die," the master roared on the fourth day, "and after he was overpriced in the first place! Hell, you must be crazy if you think I'm about to lose you along with him." He thrust a plate of food at the woman, but she sat unmoving, her eyes never straying from the boy's face. "You will eat, Mary," the master said again, his jaw quivering at the effort it took to speak calmly. His rough face grew red at her

silence, and his bushy brows jumped upon his forehead. "You will eat, Mary," he repeated louder. "YOU WILL EAT," he yelled, grabbing her skull and smearing her face with gruel. "You will eat," he hissed when she slowly turned back to face the boy, slop dripping from her chin; "because I will kill you all over again if you up and die on me."

And still the woman sat, surrounded by the dark of the cellar, the harsh rattle of her son's breathing, the scent of death approaching. The boy died in the early dawn of the fifth day. The woman's wail of mourning seemed to rock the house on its foundation, the thin walls trembling with its might. The warm hint of rising sun did not touch the dark cellar, and the woman lay with her head on her son's bare little chest, hot tears glistening against cold brown skin. "Ayo," she sobbed into the stillness, "Ayo, O Mawu, mon Ayo..."

That afternoon the master descended the steps to the cellar to find the body of a woman, cold and stiff, cradling a dead child to her chest.

The unwanted black corpses were sent to that plot of land reserved for the state's African dead. Although the bones of those in bondage were as white as the bones of those who owned them, the two could not lie beside each other; and thus sprouted the African Burial Ground.

The mother and son were buried hastily in the same shallow pit beneath a slate-gray sky. Last Rites were read in the very language that the woman had refused to speak, and the newly upturned earth pooled into dark eddies of mud above the unmarked grave.

No one came to mourn the silent woman and her Ayo John; after a time the raw earth was worn

smooth and their existence upon strange soil forgotten. But in a little village far across the Atlantic Ocean, an ancient kepegisu drummed the final journey of two lost souls to Tisiefa, Land of the Dead. And on the branch of a bayou tree, a strange purple-black bird lifted broken wings to fly to the very edge of the African sky.

**"Part Of The Past"
Second Place - Short Story
High School
By Imani Marshall
Frederick Douglass Academy**

It was a tiresome and boring Friday at Lazydale High School. Everyone was itching to get out and start the weekend. Keisha glanced at the clock and it was only 1:30, an hour and a half before school let out. She doodled in her notebook, passed notes to friends, and nodded off to sleep to pass the time away. Finally it was the last class of the day, history class. This was the subject that Keisha never had the patience for and thought was irrelevant to her own life. Again she looked at the clock, watching the little hand touch the two and the big hand touch the eleven. "Just five more minutes," she thought to herself, but little did she know what her history teacher had in store for her.

As the bell rung, the teacher handed out a sheet. When Keisha looked down, it said "Weekend Assignment" in big, bold letters. This was the only class that gave homework for the weekend. She had to write an essay about African slaves in New York during the colonial period. She had never even thought about this and had no idea where to start. "I have the whole weekend, I don't have to worry about it now," she said to herself and stuffed the assignment paper in her book bag.

Keisha walked to the bus stop thinking about all the fun ways she was going to spend her weekend: going to the movies, partying, or just chillin' on her block. She had completely forgotten about that wrinkled paper in her book bag. When she got to the bus stop, she saw a flyer dealing with the contributions and workshops of the African Burial Ground. She suddenly remembered her assignment and took down the number of the information center there. She figured she'd call them up, ask a few questions, write her essay real quick, and have the rest of the weekend free.

The next day, she called the information center. No one answered the phone, but a machine gave a little summary of what the African Burial Ground was all about. As she listened to the machine, she found what she heard to be very interesting and actually wanted to learn more. She decided that she was going to go to the library and do some research of her own. Just when Keisha was about to leave for the library, her friend Tana called. Tana wanted to know if she wanted to go to the movies, but Keisha declined the offer. She couldn't wait to go to the library and get more information about the Burial Ground.

When Keisha arrived at the library and started gathering sources, she was amazed about all the stuff she didn't know before. She learned that the African Burial Ground is right in Manhattan, New York, where she lives. She also found that there were actually Africans in colonial New York City who were slaves. When she thought of slavery she thought of a time long ago before the Civil War.

It never dawned on her that there were enslaved Africans in New York where she now lives. She read that the Burial Ground got started because the church decreed that Africans could no longer bury their dead in their churchyards.

As a result, the Africans used a vacant plot of land to bury their dead, and that land is now only a couple of blocks from City Hall. She found that in 1992 over 400 human remains were excavated from the Burial Ground in the name of science and history. Artifacts were also taken to help with the research.

The dug-up remains were sent to Howard University for study, and since then they have been able to tell where some of the Africans were from, what they died from, and the mortality rate based on age and gender. When she looked at some of the places that the Africans originated from, she realized that she had ancestors in some of the places. This meant that one of the excavated remains could have possibly been related to her.

After she gathered all the information she needed, she rushed home to start writing her essay. She had spent almost three hours at the library getting information and was surprised at how interesting she found it. On Monday, Keisha walked in the class proud of the work she had done. She read her essay aloud to the class and all the students clapped in amazement; even her teacher was impressed. She got an 'A' on the paper and has enjoyed history ever since.

"Artifacts from the African Burial Ground - An Examination."
First Place - Essay
College
by Uchechukwu Nwamara
Howard University

In May 1991, archaeologists in New York's lower Manhattan made a unique discovery: a portion of the old "Negroes Burying Ground," or African Burial Ground. Over 400 remains were unearthed at this site where Africans were buried during

the course of the 18th century. Although the exact date of the first use of the burial ground is still unknown, it is at least three hundred years old, and is thus the oldest excavated African cemetery in North America. The remains in the African Burial Ground almost certainly represent some members of the first generation of African Americans in New York City.

This extraordinary find aroused great interest and excitement in the African American community and the general public, and this interest has only increased in more recent years as new revelations come to light from the examination of the remains. At the urging of the African American community, the remains were taken, quite fittingly, to Howard University, where to date a team of African American scholars, led by Dr. Michael L. Blakey of the University's Anthropology Department, is engaged in examining the remains. Some of the discoveries made thus far have shattered popular conceptions about slavery in colonial and post-colonial America.


The first Africans came to New York in 1625. New Amsterdam, as the city was then called, was colonized by the Dutch in the first decade of the 17th century, but was ceded to the British in 1665. Like later slaves, these first Africans were victims of the infamous trans-Atlantic slave trade, which brought captured Africans to the Americas and Europe by way of the West Indies. One of the ways in which the European slavers sought to break the spirit of the African slaves and make them more subservient was to undermine their indigenous culture and traditions which were contemptuously dismissed by the European Americans as barbaric, but they represented the consciousness of the people and were thus a part of them.

Thus, apart from resisting slavery through physical means (there were two slave revolts in New York, in 1712 and 1741), there was also a psychological resistance, a resistance to white attempts to destroy the African traditions that the slaves brought with them. And by all indications, the Africans succeeded admirably in resisting. One of the ways in which Africans expressed their culture was the African Burial Ground. Having been deprived of the right to bury their dead on church land, the Africans found a place where they could bury their dead in accordance with their native customs and traditions.

From the unique character of the burial rite, it is evident that there was a concerted effort on the part of the Africans to practice their culture; and this persistence in practicing their culture in spite of pressure from the slave drivers is a very telling form of resistance. First of all, many of the remains were very carefully wrapped in burial shrouds, which were held together with shroud pins, and placed carefully in the graves.

This method of burial suggests an Islamic character, which would not be unusual if the deceased was from East or North Africa, most countries of which had been converted to Islam by this time. Apart from the remains found in the Burial Ground, some artifacts such as cowrie shells, rings, and coins were found, and the remains of one woman had a string of beads around her waist.

As an African myself, I recognize some of the features in the burials as those I have come across in my native country. Cowrie shells were a form of legal tender in pre-colonial Africa, and were used for trading and other transactions throughout the 18th century.



This can be seen from Chinua Achebe's celebrated African novel Things Fall Apart, where bags of cowries were used in paying the bride price for marriages.

Interestingly, in the Fante language of Ghana, where it is acknowledged that a sizeable number of the enslaved Africans in New York originated, cowries are known as Cidie, and it was from this word that the name for the Ghanaian currency, the Cedi, was derived. Cowries were in use in West Africa up to the early twentieth century.

The wearing of beads around the waist is a common practice in Africa, especially among women. The wearing of these beads served different, and indeed contrary, purposes. In my native Ibo tribe, for instance, such beads were usually worn by unmarried women, and they served to accentuate the hips, and thus to increase the sex appeal of the young lady in question in the hope that someone would want to marry her. In other parts of Africa, East Africa in particular, such beads were meant to indicate modesty.

There are several indigenous African names for these beads. For instance, in my native Ibo language such beads are called Mgbija; they are called Owo-eyo in the Yoruba, and Jigida in the Hausa language, Ivie in Edo (1). In the Fante language, beads are called Awhunie. Beads and rings were also worn for good luck in farming and in daily life, and also served as talismans to ward off evil spirits, such talismans were called Juju in the Yoruba language, Ogwu in Ibo(2).

It is highly probable that early African Americans carried these talismans as a form of protection and support while being transported under vile conditions to a strange land that they did not know, and that

they continued to depend on them upon their arrival here, while suffering under the dehumanizing conditions of slavery. It was also not uncommon in Africa for people to be buried with these objects.

One of the symbols found in the Burial Ground is a heart shaped design which scholars think is linked to the Ghanaian symbol Sankofa. Sankofa signifies, among other things, looking to the past to improve the future. This is an idea at the very heart of the African Burial Ground Project. It enables us to know the horrors of the past institution of slavery, so that we can be empowered never to allow such an atrocity to repeat itself.

The Project provides all people of African descent with a unique opportunity. It enables African Americans to have some idea of their origins, and who their forefathers were, so that they can cease to be a rootless people without a heritage.

For those of us who are Africans, it enables us to know how heinous an institution it was that kept our brothers enslaved, and what part our forefathers played in it, so that, like the Ghanaian Chiefs who visited the United States in 1995, in the spirit of Fihankra, or togetherness, we can begin to make amends.



Notes:

- 1 Shanga in Swahili
- 2 Called Umu-Mmuo in Ibo

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Karp, Ivan and Charles C. Birds, Eds. Explorations in African Systems of Thought. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980.

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2001 Student Writing Competition Winners

Elementary School

Poetry

Honorable Mention:

"The Slave Girl"

Kate Newman, P.S. 114

Middle School

Poetry

1st Place:

"African Presence in Early New York State"

Othania Johnson Singh,
P.S./M.S. 75X

2nd Place:

"When the British Took Over"
Akara Ambak, Ausar Auset School

Honorable Mention:

"Slavery"

Rashad Abdus-Salaam, M.S. 267

Junior High School

Poetry

1st Place:

"The Way They Treat Us"
Arian Halsey, Ausar Auset School

Honorable Mention:

"The Shattered Glory of My Ancestors"

Sharde Simpson, United Nations International

Honorable Mention:

"Bleeding Wall"

Imani Reid, District 11 Bronx

Short Story

Honorable Mention:

"Hear My Story"

Arian Halsey, Ausar Auset School

Honorable Mention:

"The First Slave Revolt"

Cameron C. Clarke, Ausar Auset School

High School

Poetry

1st Place:

"The Burial Grounds"
Caprice Hortense Gray,
Hunter College High School

Continued on page 10

Poetry Winners

"An African Presence in Early New York State" First Place - Middle School by Othania Johnson P.S./M.S. 75

Who am I?

This woman was born to master,
But instead was enslaved by her
master.

Who is he:

The master that enslaved me,
Dragged me through ditches,
Whipped my fine body,
Starved me halfway to death:
A sin,
And then...expected me,
To slave for him.

Who am I to be owned by some-
one?

Who am I to be loaned by some-
one?

I'm my own African woman.
I bore scars working on planta-
tions.

I'm my own woman
In this North American nation.

I've prayed to God
That the thirteen children I've
borne
Wouldn't have to go through this
misery
Although some went into slavery
But I will live on in history.

Though my heart still bleeds
I've had a way to figure out all
my needs.

I preached until slavery was abol-
ished.
I prevailed courageously.
Encouraged by my friends,
Who were dedicated to equality.

Ole Sojourner, that's me,
As I fought for freedom:
The God given right,
You see!

Why shouldn't we black folks
be free?

So if I die today or tomorrow,
Let it be,
One less black and beautiful me.

And old Sojourner Truth this day
Ain't got nothing more to say!

But Amen.



"When The British Took Over" Second Place - Middle School by Akara Ambak Ausar Auset School

At first we were under Dutch rule
Which was actually simple and not
cruel

They said we could marry legally
And that we could own land and
property
We could also sue and testify
For ourselves and all of our wives
The British then came and took
over

I will tell you how it happened
I will tell you how it came to closure
And in the end you must start clap-
ping

It was a hot summer day I was
playing in the sand
Then this mean man grabbed my
hand

I heard my father shouting, the
British are trapping
And they can't be happy.

I thought if they are trapping and
can't be happy

They surely want us to be slaves
And if we die at sea the water will
be our grave

He threw me on the ship
And said this is where you sit
We were all squished up

And had supper once a month
I saw them beat a pregnant lady
And thought, are all these men
lazy?

I thought of many things to do
While the man called on all of his
crew

When we got there we were being
watched by the crew

And thinking of many things to do
The next day they told us to work
And that we would be using a big
fork

They changed the Dutch's rules
completely

And said we would do this work
weekly.

They told us we could not carry
weapons

And that we could not have any
siblings.

At the age 28, I became free
But somewhere in my heart tells
me

That in my next incarnation the
British will takeover

And I will put slavery to a final clo-
sure



"The Way They Treat Us" First Place - J. H. School by Arian Angaza Halsey Ausar Auset School

They take our feet from African soil.
They take us from our families.

They throw on those heavy, painful
shackles.

Those shackles were thrown on
our necks, hands, feet.

Oh! Those painful shackles!
Dutch Company ships take us from
our land.

Full of my brothers and sisters,
No room to sit, no room to turn, no
room to breathe.

My ear picks up the pain,
The moans and cries of my family,
my people.

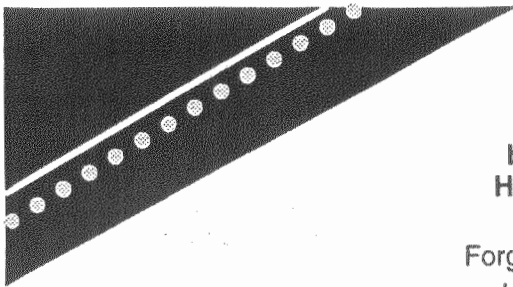
They hear the moans and cries of
me.

We arrive in New Amsterdam har-
bor:

11 male slaves, Pablo Angola,
Simon Congo and all the others.

All of us shoved and pushed off the
ship.





"The Burial Grounds"
First Place - High School
by Caprice Hortense Gray
Hunter College High School

Immediately we worked as farmers,
builders and in the fur trade.
Winter, summer, spring & fall
We work, we work, we work on
their soil, in their land.

Oh no! The British are here!
We live a nightmare. They take
away what the Dutch call "half free-
dom."

First shackles, then whips, now
"slave codes."

They said we Africans could not be
self-employed.

They said we could not aid our
mothers, our children, our people
who were running away from this
madness.

We were imprisoned till near death.

Slave codes told us how to live,
marry, die, and be freed.

We fought, we resisted, we revolt-
ed.

With hatchets and hoes, guns and
knives, we marched through
the city.

It was 1712, Africans joined with
Native Americans.

They burned and destroyed what
little we had.

They killed who we loved.

Yet our spirit never dies.

We revolt, we fight, we resist with
our last ounce of strength.

For we are African people,

We will always be free.



Forgotten for years beneath the
rocky earth
Stray breezes sending long-dead
leaves
Skittering across unmarked graves
Lay the white bones of America's
black unwanted
In the shallow pits that were allot-
ted to them
Upon their untimely death.

The earth alone knows the story
of these many dead
Whispered from the empty hollow
of weary bones
In the quiet of dusk, as the setting
sun turns black leaves golden
And the sigh of lost souls stirs
the city twilight.

Remember us now, their voices cry
The echo of children's laughter
mingling with wind and wisps
of evening cloud
Remember us who have been
forgotten,
We who toiled on strange soil
And died before our time.

Pale, sun-bleached weeds grow
in patches where mourners
once stood,
Watered by their tears, their sweat,
their blood
Sprouting from earth that was
once black flesh
Flowers bloom to honor
these nameless,
These Africans of America.



"If Only Bones Could Talk"
Second Place - High School
by Julia El-Amin
Frederick Douglass Academy

The African Burial Ground,
A place below,
Where 20,000 Africans took their
final rest,
Both enslaved and free,
Finally they are free of depression,
slaughter, cruelty, torment and
inequality,
But don't underestimate the reality,
The reality of how they got there,
They died with dignity,
But dignity did not stop the suffer-
ing,
They were murdered and lynched
to no end,
Of course there was fear,
But never did they shed a tear,
For they held their pride so dear,
Don't you dare forget all they had
to bare,
Somebody better care,
This is no game,
It's not all the same,
For this treatment of Africans is not
known for fame,
It's known for History,
History in which there's no mystery,
No one is without a clue,
For the facts are as visible as the
color blue,
It sticks in our minds like glue,
But the thought of it makes you feel
sick to the stomach as if you have
a bad case of the flu,

Now they are buried one by one,
Praised only by their people,
And hated by their oppressors,
They are buried below in a place
called The African Burial Ground,
But still there's no peace



For that same place where they
were buried was rudely disturbed
by construction workers,
Who dugged up their bones while-
working on the area in which they
were buried,
You may call it an accident,
But I call it the government,
I know these games all too well,
Slavery may be gone,
But racism still lives,
And hatred still thrives,

The government you may ask with
confused eyes,
But wake up,
It's their plan,
They are just as violent as the Klu
Klux Klan,
You better see through the govern-
ment's disguise,
And realize what you are looking at
are the murderers of our people,
It was their plan in which they
made it seem like an accident,
But what they were really doing
was removing the bones of our
people,
So their legacy can die,
So it would seem as if slavery did
not ever exist,
But we would resist,
Resist their lies and hateful eyes,

If only bones could talk, they would
say:
"Here you go again trying to steal
from me my rightful place on
earth,"
Does this ring a bell?
Once more hatred, cruelty, oppres-
sion,
Yes, Deja vu,
It ain't just you,

If only bones could talk they would
say:
"Let me be,
Haven't I suffered enough?"
Their death does not please the

oppressors,
For they want all our remains gone,
For just one proof of our existence
burns in their evil hearts,
Because they know we are the
Queens and Kings of the world,
The creators of civilization,
and the philosophers of humanity,
If only bones could talk they would
say
"Give up!
For our history is stronger than the
evil you possess."
If only bones could talk.

◆◆◆

**"I Can't Stand To See A
Black Man Bleed"**
Third Place - High School
by Keli-Dionne C. Wood
Thomas Edison High School

I can't stand to see a Black
man bleed-
Red, red blood
Against
Rich caramel
skin
Chocolate skin
Black skin
Sliding slowly to the floor
Blood covering the fields
Rivers of wine
Killing the earth
Puffs of smoke
Gun smoke
Fueled by hatred and
blackened hearts

Desperate cries in the dark
Cries to rend your tender heart
Tears to wash your soul away
Scarlet ribbons dancing across
a man's back

And there I am-
Eyes closed in fear
Eyes closed in pain
Heart screaming for mercy
Heart screaming for justice

Heart bleeding in sympathy for
Those pictures
Those scenes
Dripping with tears of blood
Black men's tears

No-
I can't stand to see a Black man
bleed.

◆◆◆

"Dem Bones"
First Place - College
by Shamaine A. Frater
Baruch College

Taken from the Mother Land
Underneath the hull they rode,
These are the bones of our
ancestors.

No food, no rest, just a whole lot
of mess.
Cracked, twisted, mutilated,
young ones, old ones,
These are the bones of our
ancestors.

The buildings are rising as
they seek to drown out the
Popping and the cracking of
the bones of our ancestors.
Who will hear their cries as
the muffled sounds blow in
the wind?

Help is on the way, O bones of
our ancestors.
Arise and let us go. We have
marched and prayed. The light
is getting
brighter. Hold on, help is on the
way, O bones of our ancestors.

◆◆◆

**"Haunting Of The
Early Presence"
Second Place - College
by Ronita Johnson
Medgar Evers College**

The spirit of New York, do you hear
my ancestors haunting cries?
Will the souls that rest here be
uncovered to annihilate past, pre-
sent and future lies?
Can my soul bare?
With the divinity in me, the will and
intent was always there.
We were here in early New York
City, damn, my people were every-
where.
So why erase, or misplace a race.
The ground should tremble where
they rest if it means truth will find its
rightful pace.
How wall street got its name.
Do you really want to know?
We were pinned to a wall as we
accepted our fates and waited to
be sold.
Our blood, our labor, actually built
this city.
The balance and order of goddess
Maat will pierce through their fake
pity.
When the questions are asked.
How will the answers be spoken?
When I speak of my ancestors, I
will remain unbroken.
The day the sun shines in its true-
ness, I will feel the joy of their
peace.
When the rain falls so hard, their
cries will never be forgotten.
When the wind blows, their thank
yous to us will be heart felt.
The fire in the strength of their spir-
it will inspire me and others.
Most importantly, the earth will
remain their ground to rest with no
need to haunt our consciousness
of their struggle because we will
have awaken finally, and set things
right.

◆*◆

Continued from page 6

2nd Place:

"If Only These Bones Could Talk"
Julia El-Amin, Frederick Douglass Academy

3rd Place:

"I Can't Stand to See a Black Man Bleed"
Keli-Dionne C. Wood,
Thomas Edison High School

Short Story

1st Place:

"Ayo John"
Caprice Hortense Gray, Hunter College High School

2nd Place:

"Part of the Past"
Imani Marshall, Frederick Douglass Academy

College

Poetry

1st Place:

"Dem Bones"
Shamaine A. Frater, Baruch College

2nd Place:

"Haunting of the Early Presence"
Ronita Johnson, Medgar Evers College

Essay

1st Place:

"Artifacts from the African Burial Ground: An Examination"
Uchechukwu O. Nwamara, Howard University

Honorable Mention:

"The Children of the African Burial Ground and their Legacy"
Noelle Trent, Howard University

Kudos to Our Judges:

Ayo Harrington, Friends of the African Burial Ground Project
Cynthia Copeland, New York Historical Society
Dr. Martia Goodson, Baruch College
Phyllis Murray, P.S. 175X
Ruth Rose, Hunter College
Cynthia Hubbard
Elise Alexander, OPEI
Nonet Dapul, OPEI
Donna Harden-Cole, OPEI
Libby Jackson, OPEI
Tamara R. Jubilee-Shaw, OPEI
Shaniqua Maxwell, OPEI
Susan Ackoff Ortega, OPEI Intern
Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson, OPEI



African Burial Ground Update

Compiled by Sherrill D. Wilson, Ph.D.,
Libby Jackson & Donna Harden-Cole

□ *Celebrating the Life of Elizabeth Jennings* (Continued from page 1)

The reception was attended by Mrs. Elizabeth Allen and Mrs. Harriet Brown and family (the descendants of the children raised by Jennings), former African Burial Ground (ABG) Federal Steering Committee member and artist Miriam Francis, OPEI Volunteer Dr. Martia Goodson and students of Baruch College, author William Loren Katz, Joan Maynard of the Weeksville Society, and former ABG Federal Steering Committee member, teacher and community activist, Phyllis C. Murray, as well as OPEI volunteers Yvette Kelly and Jerome Stephens. *New York Newsday* provided media coverage.

□ **OPEI Celebrates 9th Annual Open House**
To commemorate nine years of providing information on the New York African Burial Ground Project and the early and historic African presence in New York, the OPEI opened its doors to the public on Saturday, May 19, 2001. The day's events included: the announcement and recognition of the winners of the 2001 Student Writing Competition (see pages 3-10), a brief project update from Dr. Michael Blakey of Howard University and Mr. Ronald Law of the U.S. GSA, as well as the OPEI premiere showing of the recently released PBS documentary "Bones of Our Ancestors."

The keynote speaker for the Open House was William Loren Katz, renowned for his publications on Black Cowboys and African Americans in the West. More than 75 individuals attended the Open House. Mr. Katz's talk highlighted the New York African presence from the 17th century through the early Harlem Renaissance period. He is the author of *Black Indians*, *Black Women of the Old West*, and *Black Legacy: A History of New York's African Americans*, as well as numerous other publications.

□ **"Bones of Our Ancestors,"** directed by Orlando Bagwell of Roja Productions, a Harlem based film company, is a PBS documentary that premiered in May 2001. It's a "behind the scenes" look at the preparation

and rehearsals for a play developed by performance students at the Henry Street Settlement.

The film captures their experiences and reactions to a slide presentation, lab, and site tour of the historic African Burial Ground given by OPEI Public Educators.

The film is a truly innovative way to creatively express the many ways the African Burial Ground experience touched and inspired these youth who, as a result of visiting the lab and going on a site tour, have a new found appreciation and understanding of their culture and history. "Bones of Our Ancestors" has been added to OPEI's film library.

□ **The National Conference of Artists (NCA)**, the oldest and largest organization of black artists, art scholars, collectors and supporters of the visual arts, held its 42nd Annual Conference called "Gateway to Africa" in New York on April 11th-14th. NCA's New York Chapter President, Brother Kwume coordinated the conference.

Dr. Lorenzo Pace's sculpture "Triumph of the Human Spirit" was the meeting place for the opening day festivities. Atiba Wilson led in the drumming ceremony that preceded a processional to the African Burial Ground. Among those in attendance were community activist Mother Franklin and a representative from the office of Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields, who presented the group with a proclamation. The distinguished panel of speakers included OPEI Director Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson and Dr. Pace, who presented his new children's book, *Jalani and the Lock*.

□ **The July 21, 2001 OPEI Summer Symposium** will be an African Burial Ground Project **Volunteer training session/conference held from 12 Noon to 5 P.M.** All previously trained project volunteers are invited to attend a special screening of the documentary film "Bones of Our Ancestors" and to discuss plans to resume the publication of the volunteer newsletter, *The Cornerstone*.

Explore the possibilities for greater volunteer involvement in "Spreading the Word" about the New York African Burial Ground. Potential volunteers are also invited to participate in this event. Reservations are required. Please contact volunteer coordinators Donna Harden-Cole or Kahlil Shaw at **212 432-5707** for reservations and/or further information.





OPEI's Newest Staff Members from left to right:
Selma Hernandez, M. Scott Johnson, and Libby Jackson
Photo Credit: Charris Walker

Who's New At OPEI

Libby Jackson joined the OPEI staff in March 2001 as Associate Director for Public Relations. She comes to the OPEI with over 15 years of media experience. After graduating from Emerson College in Boston, MA, with a B.S. in Mass Communications/Television, she spent 10 years at the Cable News Network (CNN) where she worked as a Video Journalist, Chyron Operator, and Graphics Coordinator.

As the move toward Internet TV spread into the mainstream, she left CNN for a successful live video streaming Internet Company called Pseudo.com where she worked as Control Room Director and Production Manager. Before coming to the OPEI she worked as a freelance Graphics Operator for CNBC, NBA, NHL, and the Maury Povich Show. Her primary goal is to develop the kind of relationship with the media that will compel them to write about the African Burial Ground in a factual and meaningful way, as well as take a more proactive approach to media relations for the African Burial Ground Project. Libby has a 5-year-old son named Sheldon Graylian.

M. Scott Johnson is a Public Educator with the OPEI. Born in Inkster, Michigan, he holds a Bachelors Degree from Western Michigan University. Johnson, who is also a trained stone sculptor, has studied cultural anthropology under the tutelage of noted African American anthropologist Dr. Warren Perry. He has also studied African history, culture and art as a vol-

unteer with the organization Operation Crossroads Africa in Zimbabwe. He spent five years traveling and studying ancient and contemporary methods of stone sculpting among such African societies as the amaNdebele, Shona, Zulu, Makonde, Masai, Tonga and Nubian. Johnson apprenticed for three years with celebrated African sculptor Nicholas Mukomberanwa of Zimbabwe.

Recently Johnson's work has been represented by the Wilber Jennings/Kenkelaba Galleries located in New York City. Johnson looks forward to continue assisting and encouraging other African American artists to return physically to the continent of Africa in order to understand the root of their creativity. In 2001, Johnson will be highlighted in The International Review of African American Art published by the Hampton University Museum.

Selma Hernandez has been an Administrative Assistant at the OPEI since February 2001. Prior to becoming an Administrative Assistant, she completed OPEI Internship requirements via the Executive Internship Program at Grover Cleveland High School of Queens, New York. Her great interest in history was the motivating factor for applying for an intern position with the African Burial Ground Project. During her internship, Miss Hernandez worked closely with Historical Researcher Tamara Jubilee-Shaw in compiling information about the African Burial Ground and related topics.

In June 2001, Miss Hernandez will graduate from Grover Cleveland High School where she has exhibited high academic achievement and is the recipient of several awards including the UFT Certificate for Excellence in Language Arts, the New York City Council Scholarship Award and the CUNY Merit Scholarship. In the fall of 2001 she will be attending the City University of New York at Hunter College to pursue a degree in psychology. Miss Hernandez plans to continue with the OPEI and hopes to become a future Public Educator.



Upcoming 2001 OPEI Events*

Jul. 21st - Summer Symposium

Aug. 18th - Open to the Public

Sept. 22nd - Film Festival

*Please call for reservations. All events are subject to change and/or cancellation.

African American History in Old New York:

Elizabeth Jennings vs. the Third Avenue Railroad Company

Susan Ackoff Ortega

Sunday afternoon, July 1854. New York City. The Lower East Side. Elizabeth Jennings — a young African American public school teacher and church organist — is forcibly ejected from a public streetcar by the conductor and a police officer because she is black.

The community is outraged. A protest meeting is organized and the Colored American Legal Rights Association is founded and led by Thomas L. Jennings (Elizabeth's activist father) and the Rev. J.W.C. Pennington, a formerly enslaved individual who escaped and went on to earn a Doctorate of Divinity from Heidelberg University in Germany. Jennings hires the pro-abolitionist Culver-Parker law firm to represent Elizabeth in her suit against the Third Avenue Railroad Company. Appointed to the case is a 23 year old lawyer, Chester A. Arthur, who later becomes the 21st President of the United States. Their February 1855 court victory leads to the integration of New York City street cars.

In the foreground Elizabeth Jennings reads a headline about her court case. This is one of four episodes depicted in the mural that describe the entire incident.

Photo credit:
Susan Ackoff Ortega



Elizabeth Jennings was a public school teacher in New York's segregated educational system. Her first teaching experience in 1849 was in School #2, the New York Society for the Promotion of Education among Colored Children, located at 19 Thomas Street in Manhattan. When she later transferred to School #1, she briefly served as temporary acting principal.

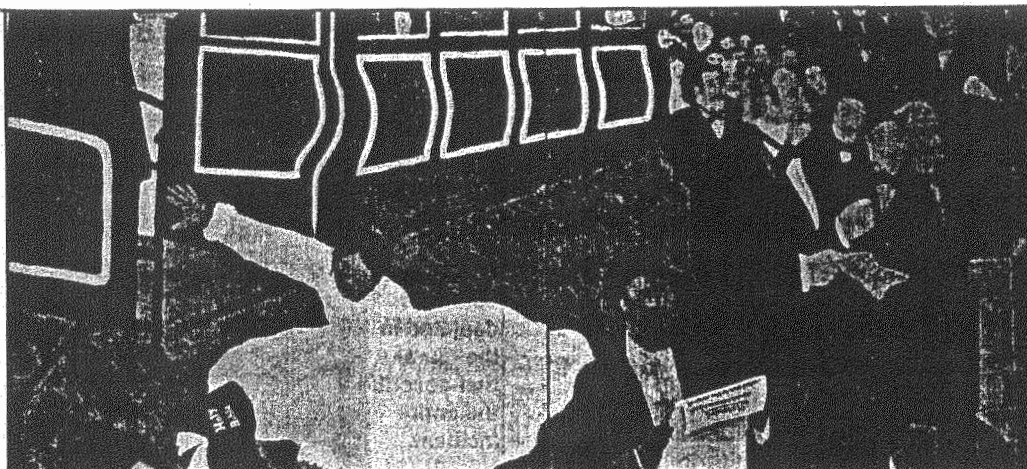
After the 1854 incorporation of all city public schools under one newly founded Board of Education, Elizabeth continued to teach through the 1860s. In the 1890s, she moved uptown to 237 West 41st Street where she established in her home the first kindergarten in New York for African American children. Classes were held in a large room that connected to her backyard where the children planted and played. She

also held a Saturday morning sewing class and directed the Graham Circulating Library named after her husband Charles Graham who died in 1869.

Elizabeth's family was active and vital. Her African-born grandfather, Jacob Cartwright, was a soldier in the American Revolution and active in city politics until his death in 1824. Her father Thomas (1791-1859), a clothier and tailor, was the first African American to receive a U.S. patent for a dry cleaning method to renovate garments. In his youth, in the then pro-slavery New York State, he paraded the streets of the metropolis with a banner inscribed with the figure of a black man and the words, "Am I not a man and a brother?" (Cited in Jennings' obituary published in *The Anglo-African Magazine*, April 1859).

In this photo of the mural, we see Elizabeth Jennings being ejected from the streetcar. On the right is a courtroom scene from her historic trial.

Photo credit:
Susan Ackoff Ortega



When Elizabeth was a year old, Thomas Jennings delivered the oration at the 1827 New York State celebration for the abolition of slavery. He was a leading member of the first, second, and third National Conventions for the Improvement of the Free People of Color in the United States and was a strong opponent of the Colonization Movement. He stated in 1827, "Our claims are on America. It is the land that gave us birth; it is the land of our nativity; we know of no other country."

Thomas Jennings was also a founder of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief (of which he was President at the time of his death), a founder of the Wilberforce Society, and a founder of Freedom's Journal, as well as founder and trustee of the Abyssinian Baptist Church. His gravestone at the Cypress Hills Cemetery in Queens, New York, is inscribed with the words: "Thomas Jennings, Defender of Human Rights."

Elizabeth's brother William was a successful businessperson in Bos-

ton. Another brother, Thomas Jr., was a surgeon-dentist in New York City and later in New Orleans. Her sister Matilda was a well-known dressmaker who later moved to San Francisco.

"Elizabeth Jennings vs. the Third Avenue Railroad Company (1855)," is a ten by twenty foot acrylic mural created by Susan Ackoff Ortega. It depicts four episodes of this little known but vital part of New York City's human rights history. The mural includes her expulsion from the street car, the mass protest meeting at the First Colored American Congregationalist Church on East 6th Street, the trial, and, finally, her victory ride in an integrated street car. The work is based on extensive research using 1850s newspapers, magazines, illustrations, census reports, city directories, maps, and secondary sources.

The mural is a tribute to the many, still to be reclaimed, everyday ancestor heroines and heroes.

The Elizabeth Jennings Memorial Committee is co-chaired by Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson, urban anthropologist and Director of The Office of Public Education and Interpretation of the African Burial Ground Project, and Susan Ackoff Ortega, muralist and art educator. The Committee's projects include: the installation of Ms. Ackoff Ortega's 10' x 20' acrylic mural telling Elizabeth Jennings' story; the naming of a New York City Public Elementary School after Elizabeth Jennings; the holding of an educational conference and the development of K-12 curriculum about this particular victory along with other struggles for freedom and civil rights in 19th century New York City; and the placement of an Elizabeth Jennings memorial plaque in lower Manhattan. For further information and/or touring of the mural, write:

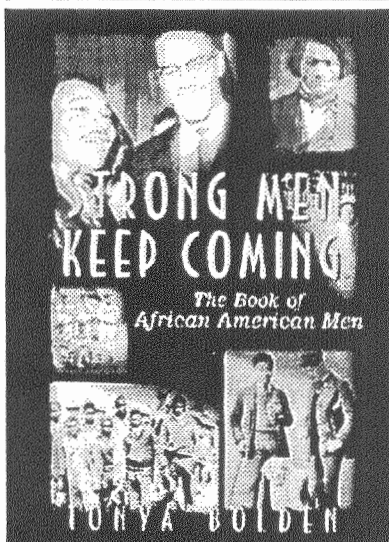
The Elizabeth Jennings
Memorial Committee
280 Ninth Avenue
Suite 1F
New York, NY 10001
email: Earth101@rcn.com



OPEI'S SPRING 2001 READING LIST

Compiled by

Sherrill D. Wilson, Ph.D.
and Nonet Dapul



Bolden, Tonya. Strong Men Keep Coming: The Book of African-American Men. New York: Wiley and Sons, 1999.

Buster, Larry Vincent. The Art and History of Black Memorabilia. New York: Clarkson Potter Publishing, 2000.

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DuBois, W.E.B. The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870.

Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999 (originally printed in 1896 by the Harvard University Press).

Earle, Jonathan. The Routledge Atlas of African-American History. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Elam, Harry J. and David Krausner. African-American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Gore, Bob. We've Come This Far: The Abyssinian Baptist Church. A Photographic Journal. New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 2001.

Griffin, Farah Jasmine, Ed. Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868. New York: One World Publishing, 1999.

Harper, France E.W. Minne's Sacrifice: Sowing and Reaping. Trial and Triumph Through Rediscovered Novels. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994.

Horton, James Oliver and Lois E. Horton. Hard Road to Freedom: The Story of African America. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001.



AN UPDATE FROM THE U. S. GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION (GSA)

Dear Friends,

Over the past months, GSA has continued to work at completing the final phase of the African Burial Ground Project. What follows is an update on the various components

Howard University

GSA and Howard University have agreed to meet in July to resolve outstanding issues. Also, Howard University will provide a schedule for the completion of the scientific research relating to the archaeology, skeletal, biology and history reports. The Descendant Community met with Dr. Michael L. Blakey and University officials to discuss concerns on the status of

the research, the outstanding reports, and what it will take for the University to meet the August 17, 2001 reinterment date.

Reinterment

GSA has been meeting with the Descendant Community to discuss the reinterment. The proposed reinterment date of August 17, 2001 is very optimistic. GSA will hold a public forum to inform the broader community.

Memorialization

The process is moving forward. The Source Selection Committee is drafting a report with its recommendation for a short end of finalists. After finalists have been identified, a community forum will be held to allow for a public review and comment of the proposals. GSA is proposing to select a finalist before the end of 2001.

OPEI

The office continues to provide outreach and educational forums on the African Burial Ground.

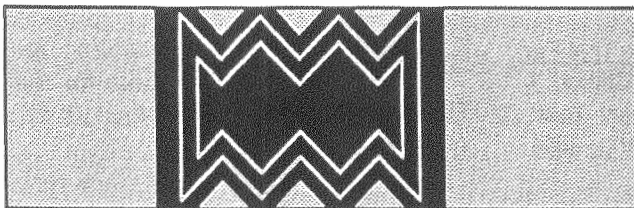
GSA is committed to reinterment. The final phase will be selecting and building the exterior memorial. It also includes the release of the scientific information from Howard University.

Best wishes,
The U.S. General Services
Administration



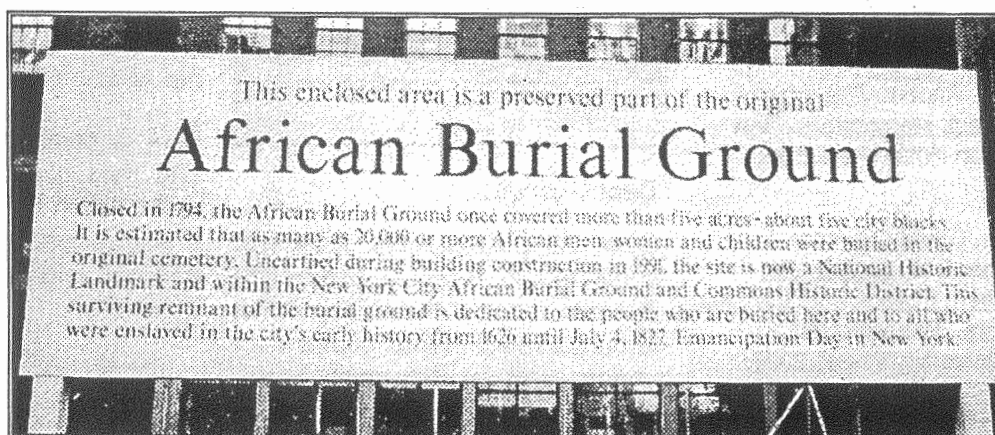
IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF UPDATE:

- ▼ New York's African Burial Ground: The Mortuary Complex in Diasporic Perspective



Office of Public Education and Interpretation
of the African Burial Ground
U.S. Custom House
6 World Trade Center, Rm. 239
New York, N.Y. 10048

ADDRESS



This enclosed area is a preserved part of the original

African Burial Ground

Closed in 1794, the African Burial Ground once covered more than five acres—about five city blocks. It is estimated that as many as 20,000 or more African men, women and children were buried in the original cemetery. Uncartied during building construction in 1991, the site is now a National Historic Landmark and within the New York City African Burial Ground and Commons Historic District. This surviving remnant of the burial ground is dedicated to the people who are buried here and to all who were enslaved in the city's early history from 1626 until July 4, 1827, Emancipation Day in New York.